



SUPPORTING & EMPOWERING VULNERABLE WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN NICARAGUA

Final Report | Submitted September 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project has allowed us to finally understand how the imprisonment of a relative impacts a family and particularly its children.
For us this project is like a 'before and after.'
This has now become a cross-cutting issue for all our programs.
The good thing is that if we identify it, now, we have the tools to address it.

- Celina Obando, Project Coordinator, INPRHU Managua

During 2018, and thanks to the support of Week of Compassion, INPRHU Managua implemented a project aimed at supporting and empowering vulnerable women and children in Nicaragua.

The program was specifically focused on addressing the needs of children with incarcerated parents, children victims of domestic violence and their caregivers.

The three main objectives of the program were:

- To develop the resilience of these children and their families,
- To allow program participants to achieve emotional recovery, and
- To encourage them to become advocates for their rights.

During this project, and with the aim of achieving these objectives, INPRHU provided psychological support to more than a 100 children, legal services and support for more than 30 children and families and organized meetings with families and with community actors to learn and educate them about these issues.

The project team also organized recreational and cultural activities for the children and youth and provided them with tools for them to become advocates and defenders of their own rights.

As a result, some of the project participants were invited to take part in different regional events children rights events. Two events already took place in El Salvador in March and in Panama in September, and the other two will take place in Guatemala in October and in Costa Rica in November. There, they will have the chance to share their experiences and life stories with other children and important regional authorities.

Aside from all the services that were provided to the children and families, the project also produced an impact within the organization. Thanks to this support, all the staff of the organization was trained about this topic and they were able to dig deeper on the issue and understand it better.

Some conclusions that the project team drew up in this regard were:

- Most of these children and families usually face financial constrains, discrimination and have to reorganize many things in their lives due to the incarceration of a relative.

- Although each situation is different, most of the children love, miss and long to be with their incarcerated relatives.
- While visiting prisons is hard, stressing and expensive, most of these children like to visit and see and spend time with their relatives every month.
- They all feel that the judges and prison systems authorities do not take into account, at any stage of the process, the impact that their decisions have on them.
- There is both a lack and a need for services as the ones that INPRHU has provided with the support of Week of Compassion.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the project was implemented in a complicated and dangerous political context that influenced, at times, the contents and the way in which the activities were carried out. (More info in the box on page 13).

Luckily, the staff at INPHRU were able overcome those challenges and implement the activities planned to achieved the key objectives of the project.

CWS, from its regional office from Latin American and the Caribbean, has technically accompanied the planning, implementation and production of content and materials phases throughout the project and has coordinated the production of the reports (Mid term - Progress and Final) that have been submitted.

In addition, CWS built the bridges so INPRHU could join the Chile Fund (Fondo Chile) process, a regional project where the organization's staff and participants were able to exchange lessons learned and experiences on addressing the issue with colleagues and authorities from Panama, Guatemala and Chile. It is in this context, that the children and youth who were part of the project also participated, and will participate, in these regional events where they shared and will share their experiences and reflections in relation to having an adult referent deprived of liberty.

PROGRAM RESULTS

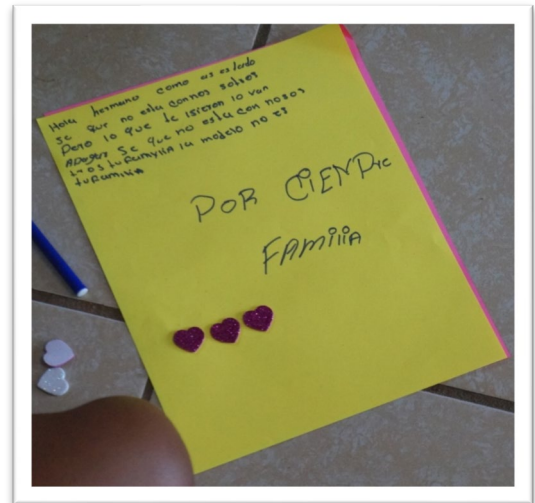
Objective 1: Provide 10-month access to integral support services to build the resilience, emotional recovery and empowerment to 50 children, including children with incarcerated parents, and their caregivers.

Psychological Support

The program provided psychological support (individual and group therapy) to 107 children and youth who have been victims of gender based and domestic violence. The 72 girls and 35 boys range from 2 to 18 years old. Most of these children have gone through violent situations. Through conversations, artistic and recreational activities, key issues started to come up to and were addressed by the group coordinators

This process included a series of workshops that had different objectives:

- ***Self-care and safety workshop***: Where the children learnt about their strengths and weaknesses and know who to turn to at times of urgency.
- ***Identifying and sharing emotions and feelings***: Using the “emocionario” (see page 9) the children were encouraged to identify and express their feelings and fears.
- ***Emotional detachment workshop***: The idea was to provide a space where the children could share those things they can’t talk to their incarcerated parents. At times they were invited to write letters to their parents and share their emotions there.
- ***Know your rights***: as the title shows, in these workshops the children were able to learn about their rights and responsibilities.
- ***“Living without my relative” workshop***: in this workshop the children were able to find strategies to cope with the absence of their relative and find strength and happiness in other referents and activities.



In parallel to these activities with the children, the INPRHU team also worked with mothers and caregivers, who are the ones who usually carry the load of these problems.

"It has been a difficult process, and sometimes I felt I couldn't do it anymore. Now things are slowly changing, and the fact that she is feeling better gives me the strength to continue. Sometimes one thinks that this will be a quick recovery but it takes time, we [moms] should remember that."

- Nicaraguan mother

Legal Services

The program provided legal advice to 33 children (mostly girls) who are survivors of sexual abuse, rape and other violent situations.

It is worth noting that generally in Nicaragua many survivors do not report the cases of violence, because of fear, a lack of economic resources or because they do not know how the legal system works. The program aims to support and encourage them to take this step.

Participants receive legal advice and accompaniment, and they are supported when they are called to provide statements in court. The program also coordinates with key actors such as forensic psychologists and special prosecutors to ensure access to justice for these children and their parents. In the cases where the child has incarcerated relatives, we ensure that special effort is made to explain the judicial process in a way that the child can understand it.

Thanks to INPRHU's support all these cases were presented to the court. As a result, just in this last trimester, two perpetrators were found guilty and sent to jail, three are on probation and another three are in prison waiting for trial.

In Nicaragua, only lawyers can access information about the judicial cases. Therefore, although it was not one of the objectives of the project, INPRHU's lawyer has assisted the families in getting information about the legal situation of their imprisoned relatives. For example, one mother wanted to be present at her daughter's trial but she was not able to access that information. Thanks to INPRHU's support she was able to get this info and be present at the trial.

All these families and children were enrolled after the community survey and families' characterization process carried out in different communities of the greater Managua. This was the tool used to collect the information.

Meeting with Families

Two meetings were held with families from different communities during the year. One was held on October 18, 2018 and counted with the participation of 63 program participants including children, parents and tutors. The second meeting was held in March 2019 and was attended by 47 participants

During these meetings the families highlighted that these spaces where they can share and get support have helped them in the midst of the anxiety and violence that the political situation is causing in communities.

"I have had high pressure, I can't sleep, when I do I wake up very early, I have nightmares...At the beginning we told him that he had gone to work, until the time came that I had to take him to the prison because he missed him so much. "

- Nicaraguan mother

Objective 2: Build the skills of 30 children (mostly youth with or who have had an incarcerated parent) and their families to defend and promote the rights of Nicaragua's vulnerable children, including children with incarcerated parents.

There are no other groups in Nicaragua who address the specific needs of children with incarcerated parents. That's why the initial program sessions focused in helping the children understand the justice and penal systems; naming and identifying the negative consequences of having an incarcerated relative; and sharing feelings related to the situation.

During the project, 36 Children with incarcerated parents (21 girls and 15 boys) and 27 caregivers, all women participated in the activities that included:

- Cultural workshops
- Recreational Activities
- Writing workshops: During these sessions, the children were encouraged to write letters to their imprisoned relatives. The women decided to write to judges and justice authorities. Some of those letters and pictures of other activities implemented during the project can be seen [here](#).

Who were the children and youth that participated in the project?

- They were between 2 and 18 years old.
- Half of them were girls.
- About 17% do not go to school.
- All of them have expressed that due to their relatives' incarceration they have felt anger, shame and depression.
- All of them said that their families are facing financial hardships.
- About half of them have one of their older brothers incarcerated.
- About half of these relatives are in prison due to a drug related crime.
- Most of the relatives in prison are men.

A Particular Request

In January, INPRHU project coordinators received a letter from an imprisoned mother. Her request: she needed support to present a case so the judge could grant her the right to finish her sentence at home. She argued that she was the mother of five children (three of them minors) and the younger one was sick so she wanted to be there to support her.

INPHRU produced a report that her relatives used and presented to the judge who finally granted her the benefit of home address.

Based on this example other relatives requested the same support from INPRHU. As of August 31, seven mothers were granted parole/home detention thanks to the support they've gotten from INPHRU and the reports written by the organization's lawyer.

More information about the characteristics of the children that were served can be found [here](#).

"I know I was invited to come here because my dad is in jail," Kevin says. He's a smiley and active child who loves to play with his friends in the neighborhood where he lives with his grandma, Jazmina. "In the beginning I felt bad," he says. "I stopped going to school because I missed my dad - he used to play with me and buy me clothes... Now I visit him twice a month. I write letters to tell him that I have done well." Along with his grandmother, Kevin participated in a meeting for families in the program. He is proud of the doll that he created "to remove everything bad".

Children and Youth become advocates for their own rights

During these activities and workshops, INPRHU staff generated a process where the participants acquired knowledge and skills to become advocates of their own rights.

Earlier in March, 19-year-old Edith (pictured, right) participated at a forum in El Salvador called "I Learn and I Become and Entrepreneur" where she shared the challenges she faced due to having a relative in prison and how she overcame them.

Shary, 13, was one of the project participants who was able to put this all into practice in September 2019 when she was invited, as a participant of the INPRHU project, to share her experience at the closing activity of the Fondo Chile¹ project that was coordinated by Chilean CWS Partner Enmarcha.

The activity took place in Panama City and counted with the participation of children and adults from Panama, Chile, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

As Shary said, "[At INPRHU] *I learned how to speak in front of the public. It was something that made me very nervous before. I also learned how to talk with other children. I enjoyed meeting other children like me with whom I talked about my problems; it was good to let off steam with them. I liked the activities we did with them and meeting the people from Chile, Panama and Guatemala.*"



¹ Chile Fund is an initiative of the Government of Chile that seeks to expand and complement the mechanisms by which Chile offers cooperation both from the Chilean Cooperation Agency itself and from other cooperation funds. This initiative reflects the country's commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda 2030 driven by the United Nations and signed since 2015 by 193 countries, including Chile. More info on <https://www.fondochile.cl/nosotros/>. INPRHU was included as part of the Chile Fund based on a suggestion made to Enmarcha by CWS back in 2018.



Another project participant who will have the chance to put this into practice is 18-year-old Hector (pictured below with Shary), who will participate at the 5th General Assembly of the CWS supported Plataforma NNAPeS in October and later in November will represent INPHRU and Plataforma NNAPeS at the 30th year anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that will be organized by the Inter American Court on Human Rights in Costa Rica. Both events will have forums where Hector and other children and youth from the region will have the chance to share their stories with different stakeholders.



Objective 3: Increase community support and protection mechanisms for Nicaragua's children with incarcerated parents and their families, especially those who are survivors of gender-based violence.

For these children to exercise all their rights, they need to leave in safe and welcoming communities. Therefore, besides all the direct services provided to these children, INPRHU has also organized several awareness raising meetings and workshops with community actors, partner institutions and coalitions:

Some of the key activities organized during the year have:

- Recruited and characterizing program participants.
- Mapped organizations: This was done at the beginning of the project using this tool. The final document can be read [here](#).
- Developed a media plan. This [media plan](#) was developed at the beginning of the project but unfortunately, due to the country's political crisis, it could not be fully implemented.
- Sign a strategic alliance with the Fabretto Foundation, who has added working with children with incarcerated parents to their agenda.
- Presented the initiative to the National Coalition of Children's Rights Organizations, which 17 organizations who work with children nationwide participated in.
- Presented the project at the Nicaraguan-American Cultural Centre.
- Presented the project for the INPRHU Masaya office staff.
- Facilitated community gatherings - with 41 total participants - at Las Torres Neighborhood and the Roberto Huembes Market to raise awareness and create empathy with children with incarcerated parents or relatives.
- Prepared, produced and presented the [Moving Museum](#) (*Museo itinerante* in Spanish)
- Production of the [Systematization](#) of the project where 5 stories of program participants were portrayed.
- Filming, production and launch of the "My Visit" short documentary.

Gladys, age 9, is the oldest of three siblings. She was separated from her mother and grandmother at an early age. Her family was split up because there was no one who could afford the financial expenses and special attention that the three children needed. Now Gladys lives with her aunt, little sister and cousins in the Las Torres neighborhood. She misses her mom because she was the one who would put Gladys to bed every night when she was a baby. It will be another two years before Gladys can be reunited with her mom, who is in prison. For now, she's participating in the meetings for children with incarcerated parents. She's shy and doesn't talk much, but she recently told us about her quitamiedos doll. The dolls are a therapy tool to help children find comfort in the face of fear. "My doll represents my aunt, who is the one that has always been there for us when something bad happened," Gladys says.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Not many project plans include activities where the implementing team present the results of the work undertaken to the families and children that participated in it.



INPRHU, as an exception, did that and presented these results to the families during the last week of March. Many families participated in this presentation and they all showed their appreciation for the work done and for the report that was presented.

The Moving Museum

Another strategy that the organization implemented to account back to the program participants (children and families) and to create awareness among people that do not know about the issue was to set up the “Children of Incarcerated Parents Moving Museum.”²

This time, the Museum was placed at the entrance of the Roberto Huembes Market, one of the most transited public markets in Managua, and later on was placed in one of the neighborhoods where the project was implemented. More than 600 visited the exhibition between those two venues.

The exhibition included information about the organization, the project, Statistics about this issue in Nicaragua and the region and also about:

- Who these children are and the challenges they face
- The stigma and discrimination they usually live with
- Their fears
- How they feel and how they express that
- The children with incarcerated parents rights
- The children with incarcerated parents needs
- Letters from the children to their incarcerated relatives.

² This is strategy created by Chilean organization Enmarcha. Museums like this one have already been produced and set up in key places and events in Chile and Panama as well.

SUSTAINABILITY

Besides the fact that Week of Compassion support has finished many of the products that were produced thanks to this project will be used by the INPRHU team in the future to create awareness about the issue and to address the needs of more families and children that are facing this situation.

Some of these products are:

- The documentary (7 minutes): It was built with families to identify the route they have to take to reach the prison facilities and the struggles they face when they are confronted with the criminal justice system.
- The "[Emotions tool](#)" (*Emocionario* in Spanish): A tool to help children and adults to recognize their emotions and to identify the ways to address and deal with them.
- The "[color your feelings](#)" tool: This document helps children recognize their emotions and match them with colors. It has helped children to better define their emotions and feelings.
- The [guide for psychological interventions](#): It is a set of tools that can help teachers, staff and practitioners to promote learning processes through reflection, recreation and interaction.
- The [Systematization](#) of the project. This document contains:
 - A brief history of the organization and the approach to the issue.
 - An explanation of the project.
 - The conclusions of the INPRHU team after the 12 months of the implementation of the project.
 - Five stories of children that clearly portray how incarceration impacts in the lives of children (the short version of one story is below. The full version of all five stories can be read in the document).
- [The Moving Museum](#). As shown on the pictures above it is a series of displays where information, photos and some of the outcomes of the project are displayed with the aim of creating awareness about how incarceration impacts in the life of these children.

Luis's father has been in prison for almost two years on pretrial detention. Luis has visited his father in prison every 15 days. His family is struggling with their financial situation. When his father went to prison, Luis dropped out of school. During the interview he was invited to write a letter. He wrote, "Hi Dad, I feel very bad because you are in prison and I'm concern about your health. I'll try to behave better and not make granny angry...I love you and it makes me happy to write this letter to you."

FINAL REMARKS & CONCLUSION

- The support from Week of Compassion has allowed the INPRHU team to get a better a deeper understanding of the children with incarcerated parents issue. Therefore, they have been able to better assist and provide support and accompaniment to this invisible population.
The impact on the staff was so strong that they have now included it as a cross cutting issue.
- The team, during this process, has confirmed that once a member of the household is arrested, “the prison” impacts the lives of all the members of that family, including the children.
- Due to the lack of offices, projects or initiatives that support and respond to the specific needs that these families and children have, this project became a unique response to this particular issue.
- While the political crisis brought several added challenges, the project team was able to implement most of the activities that were initially planned.
- For some of these families, particularly for the caretakers, this project gave them the chance to share their challenges and struggles with other families that are facing a similar situation.
- Although it was not part of the project, the fact of having presented the results of the project in the form of the MUSEO has been really important and will assist with the sustainability of the project and they now feel ownership of this project.

As a final note, CWS and INPRHU team want to thank Week of Compassion and CWS for their support to implement this project that will definitely marks a milestone in terms of the commitment and knowledge about the issue of children with incarcerated parents for the whole INPRHU family.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT IN NICARAGUA

Since April 2018, Nicaragua has been facing one of the most complex socio-political crises in its history. The current political crisis began on 16 April 2018, when the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security approved reforms to the social security system; these were confirmed on April 17 by President Daniel Ortega. The reforms included a doubling of the pension fund contribution period from 750 weeks to 1,500 weeks, cancellation of retirement benefits for thousands of senior citizens, and reduced spending on medicines for retirees. A few days after, thousands of people protested in the streets across the country and were instantly met by violent repression from Nicaraguan authorities (source: Investig'ation 12/09/2018; International Crisis Group 04/2018). Large-scale civil unrest (characterized by protests, demonstrations and strikes) has since persisted, with a multiplication of reports of violence, arbitrary detentions, harassment tactics, intimidation campaigns and incidents of torture against opposition protesters and human rights defenders (source; Notimerica 06/11/2018; IACHR 18/10/2018; OHCHR 22/11/2018).

The human rights situation in Nicaragua had been deteriorating as well, with a growing number of reports documenting violations of the right to freedom of expression, and repression of protests mounted by farmer communities and environmental activists (most notably against the Grand Canal mega-project) (source: Plaza Publica 06/08/2018).

Repressive government strategies intensified in June 2018, with the launch of what was referred to as a 'cleaning operation' in the media (officially called 'operation for peace'), aimed at destroying barricades erected as a form of protest by citizens around Managua. The government operation resulted in at least 10 civilian deaths and 20 people injured (source: Amnesty International 18/10/2018, El Mundo 16/07/2018). Since the protests began in mid-April, 325 people (including children) have been killed (the majority by government forces), and over 2,000 injured (source: OHCHR 22/11/2018; IACHR 18/10/2018). In addition, at least 552 people (including 46 women) are being held in prisons in the country for protesting against Ortega's government (source: Notimerica 06/11/2018).

The political crisis has led to economic turmoil, and on October 1, 2018, Nicaragua formally fell into recession for the first time since the global financial crisis of 2009.

Until mid-August, according to figures from the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners of Costa Rica, more than 23,000 Nicaraguans had requested refuge, of which 2,464 were children and adolescents.

Due to this situation, many families have been displaced and others have fled the country. As a result, many children and adolescents are not able to exercise their rights to study, play and participate in cultural activities mainly due to the presence of police and paramilitary agents in communities and public spaces.

Everything about this situation—the lack of job opportunities and the danger to leave homes—is affecting the adult population but also the lives of children since the levels of violence, at home and at community level, have increased tremendously.